‘Social workers dismissed concerns’: A corpus-assisted discourse study of the portrayal of a profession in UK newspapers

Maria Leedham
The Open University, UK
Outline

1) Social work in UK newspapers

2) Method

3) Findings:

4) Summary and implications
Background

Comparatively recent profession
C19 - philanthropic and amateur beginnings (Bisman, 2004)

From 2000 - the job title 'social worker' has been a protected title requiring a recognised social work qualification and registration (D. N. Jones, 2018).

From 2002 - graduate entry profession (Skills for Care, 2019)

Three domains of social work: children's, adult generic, adult mental health

Photos: John Birdsall
Social workers in the UK press

History

• 1973 – Maria Colwell death
• 1970s, 80s, 90s - Climate of fear, blame and mistrust (Ayre, 2001)
• 2007 - ‘Baby P’ – Peter Connelly case - ‘[i]ntensely hostile media coverage and political reaction’ (Warner, 2013:1638)
• 2008-2010 – Child sex abuse scandals uncovered in Rochdale, Oxford and Rotherham

So…

• Largely negative portrayal - Especially in child protection (e.g. Reid & Misener, 2001; Warner, 2013)

• Social workers are in the news when a case goes wrong
• Accountability & ‘blame culture’ – from press and public (Munro, 2010)
• Influences how the public view SWs, and how SWs view themselves
• Important as many social workers thinking of leaving (56%, acc. to Community Care survey, 2019)
Previous studies and literature

- Franklin (1998) – UK newspapers ‘overwhelmingly negative and critical’
- Ayre (2001) – focus on scandals within child protection
- Penhale and Young (2015) – positive stories ‘comparatively rare’
- Comparative studies suggest UK press are more severe on individuals (e.g. Lonne and Parton’s comparison of press coverage in the UK and Australia, 2014; Reid and Misener’s comparison of the UK and US, 2001).

- Franklin & Parton (2014) – 2 types of SW failure:
  - ‘failure to intervene where children had died’ and removing children from their families ‘on the basis of flimsy evidence’ (Parton, 2014:2048)
- the ‘cultural scapegoats’ for society (Parton, 2014:2049)
Research aims

• 1) What are the proportions of positive, negative and neutral mentions of social worker(s) in the UK press?

• 2) What are the dominant subcategories within each of these three groups?

• 3) How are social workers affected by press coverage of their profession?
Method

• SWP19 - a corpus of 3 months of articles from Nexis-UK seeded around *social worker*

• Almost 1000 occurrences in 736 articles (5.1m words)

• Removal of duplicates – 974 remaining

• Manual thematic analysis - categorisation as ‘positive’, ‘negative’, or ‘neutral’ using WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2019)

• 91% intra-rater reliability

• Subcategorisation through iterative rereading and sorting, employing substantial co-text

• Semantic categorisation of SWP2019 using WMATRIX (Rayson, 2009)

• Note: study looks at individual occurrences and classifies these. Previous studies classified whole articles

• Secondary dataset of 8 interviews with social workers (from WiSP (Writing in professional social work www.writinginsocialwork.com, Lillis et al., 2019))
Findings: categorisation of 974 lines (%)

- Both men had histories of domestic violence, crime and drug use, yet social workers dismissed concerns and did not intervene. [The Daily Telegraph, 07/06/19]

- A High Court judge has praised the tireless "coalface work" carried out by social workers on behalf of vulnerable children. [The Independent, 11/05/19]

- Smith was given a community payback order which will see him supervised by social workers for 12 months [mirror.co.uk, 24/07/10]
• 655 instances (71% of total)

1) Smith was given a community payback order which will see him supervised by *social workers* for 12 months, [...] [mirror.co.uk, 24/07/10]

2) Doctors, teachers, social workers, community activists and police officers came together [thetimes.co.uk, 28/07/10]

3) It plays an important role in introducing new *social work* training, Signs of Safety framework

4) She "finally found her calling" when she started training as a social worker, [...] [The Guardian, 07/05/19]
Classification: positive

• 45 instances (5% of total)

1) A High Court judge has praised the tireless "coalface work" carried out by social workers on behalf of vulnerable children. [The Independent, 11/05/19]

2) But Kalpana Thakur, a women's rights activist and social worker, said the statistics indicated the killing of female foetuses. [The Daily Telegraph, 25/07/19]

3) But the 29-year-old centre back can put the perspective because he is used to overcoming hurdles in his day job as a social worker. [Daily Mail, 24/07/19]

4) Our social worker was amazing and had a child in mind for us from the start. [Daily Mirror, 16/06/19]

Members of the public will ‘hold a distinct and more positive view of an individual social worker’ even if the negative overall impression of the group endures (Legood et.al., 2016:1886)
Findings: categorisation of 974 lines (%)
Classification: negative

• 241 occurrences (25% of total)
Classification: negative – failure to notice/act

1) Both men had histories of domestic violence, crime and drug use, yet social workers dismissed concerns and did not intervene. [The Daily Telegraph, 07/06/19]

2) SOCIAL workers and teachers were facing serious questions last night after a county lines gang plucked 25 boys and girls from care homes and units for expelled pupils to sell drugs 70 miles away. [dailymail.co.uk, 13/05/19]

3) Other failings included not following up on a 14-year-old girl's disclosure of historical physical and sexual abuse, [thetimes.co.uk, 24/05/19]

4) And today it can be revealed that prostitute Louise Porton, 23, conned social workers just four days before she "squeezed the life" out of the eldest of her two baby girls. [thesun.co.uk, 02/08/19]

• Supported by semantic tagging
• Keyness of semantic grouping FAILURE, FAILING, LOSING (ref corpus: BNC written sampler).
1) She felt under pressure from gardai and social workers in Cura, a Catholic agency, to give her baby up for adoption. [thetimes.co.uk, 16/06/19]

2) Fortunately, the ward manager asked to see the paperwork which proved that the baby was at risk. There wasn't any. But from then on, a social worker turned up at Amber's house to watch her for hours each day. [dailymail.co.uk, 11/07/19]

3) I was quizzed by medics and social workers, then made to wait for a long time; [The Guardian, 24/07/19]

4) The social workers asked me the most prying questions [The Guardian, 03/08/19]

5) Judge backs parents who sent four-year-old son to school in girl's uniform despite social workers accusing them of 'actively encouraging' their child's transgender identity [Mailonline, 10/05/19]
1) She felt under pressure from gardai and social workers in Cura, a Catholic agency, to give her baby up for adoption. [thetimes.co.uk, 16/06/19]

2) Fortunately, the ward manager asked to see the paperwork which proved that the baby was at risk. There wasn't any. But from then on, a social worker turned up at Amber's house to watch her for hours each day. [dailymail.co.uk, 11/07/19]

3) I was quizzed by medics and social workers, then made to wait for a long time; [The Guardian, 24/07/19]

4) The social workers asked me the most prying questions [The Guardian, 03/08/19]

5) Judge backs parents who sent four-year-old son to school in girl's uniform despite social workers accusing them of 'actively encouraging' their child's transgender identity [Mailonline, 10/05/19]

6) Instead we have regiments of armoured paramilitary social workers, jingling with clubs, Tasers, pepper sprays and often guns, schooled in political dogmas and vigilant for political correctness. [dailymail.co.uk, 03/08/19]
1) Social worker is struck off for fleecing her retired boyfriend out of more than £60,000 [...] [MailOnline, 28/06/19]

2) And now, the social worker shares her bed with two men and a woman, with Amelia's children even calling her their 'other mother'. [Daily Mail, 14/06/19]

3) There were no foster places available, so he was driven to a B&B on the outskirts of Chesterfield by a social worker and told to wait for someone to tell him what to do next. [The Guardian, 26/07/19]
Social workers’ views on the press

• 8 interviewees from the WiSP project

R3: [...] And anything you can say on your social or ethnic background? SW: I'm a typical social worker. For the benefit of the tape I'm white and I'm British and I'm wearing doc martins and I've got short hair and I read the guardian. [SW56_mh_int1]

There's huge feelings around, huge worries around being shamed in the media or being shamed by your managers because you haven't done it properly. There's all sort of like, you know issues going on around anxiety, shame and guilt that we're dealing with all the time. [...] You don't want to be put in a situation where you're open to a lot of criticism in the court arena because you will be named. I mean social workers are named in court judgements.

[...] And obviously those names can then get released into the press. Erm, the press can find out where you live. Erm, yeah, I mean it's scary. It really is so scary. [SW06_ch_int1]
I think that, erm, the context in terms of austerity, and in terms of social work after Baby P, which I think has distorted quite a lot about what, erm, people see as important to record and to look for. Erm, er, I think that public perception of social workers has changed as well, erm, following that. [SW09_ch_int1]
Summary and implications

• Press mentions of *social worker* are dominated by child protection cases
• Majority of instances are neutral
• Far more negative than positive occurrences
• Social workers criticized more for *inaction* than for over-zealous behaviour (ratio of 5:2)
• Significant minority of negative occurrences concern an individual who happens to be a SW and who has behaved badly in their personal life
• Press portray SWs as individuals who should be ‘good people’ and hold them to a higher moral standard than the rest of us
• Press portrayal is important as likely to harm recruitment and retention to social work
References

Thank you

Questions/comments to:
Maria.Leedham@open.ac.uk
@marialeedham

For more on WiSP project see:
www.writinginsocialwork.com